

Teens and Steroids: A Dangerous Combo

The abuse of anabolic steroids can cause both temporary and permanent injury to anyone using them. Teenagers, whose bodies are still developing, are at heightened risk. An alarming number of them are trying steroids in hopes of improving their athletic prowess or their appearance. Ali Mohamadi, M.D., a medical officer in the Food and Drug Administration's Division of Metabolism and Endocrinology Products, warns teens and parents about the dangers of steroid use.

Q: What are anabolic steroids and how many teens use them?

A: They are drugs that mimic the actions of the male sex hormone testosterone. This includes promoting the growth of cells, especially in muscle, and maintaining or increasing male physical characteristics. Various studies have been conducted and generally reflect the findings of a Youth Risk and Behavior Surveillance System study, which estimated that among U.S. high school students, 4.9% of males and 2.4% of females have used anabolic steroids at least once in their lives. That's 375,000 young men and 175,000 young women.



Ali Mohamadi, M.D., a medical officer at FDA, wants teens to know how dangerous it is to use steroids in hopes of being better athletes or more attractive.

Q: What are the side effects of taking anabolic steroids?

A: They are known to have a range of serious adverse effects on many organ systems, and in many cases the damage is not reversible. They include fertility problems, impotence, high blood pressure and cholesterol, and heart and liver abnormalities. Boys may experience shrinkage of the testes or the development of breast tissue; girls may experience menstrual irregularities and development of facial and body hair. Both may experience acne. Both boys and girls may also experience mood swings and aggressive behavior, which can impact the lives not only of those taking steroids, but of everyone around them.

Q: Are prescriptions needed to get steroids?

A: Yes, in fact anabolic steroids are classified as Schedule III Controlled Substances by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration with strict regulations, meaning that not only is a prescription required, but there are extra controls. For example, it is illegal to possess them without a prescription in the United States, and in most circumstances the prescription must be in written form and cannot be called into a pharmacist. Labels on some steroids recommend testing of hormone levels during use.

The number of FDA-approved uses is limited. Most are prescribed as a replacement for sub-normal levels of steroids. They are also prescribed for conditions such as muscle wasting, poor wound healing, and very specific pulmonary or bone marrow disorders.

A health care professional can prescribe steroids off-label, meaning for conditions other than those that are FDA-approved. But children, particularly teenagers, are getting access to steroids and taking them for reasons far outside of their intended use.

Q: So how are teens getting access?

A: Some get prescriptions from a licensed practitioner for such purposes as introducing puberty to boys who are “late bloomers” or to stimulate growth among teens who are failing to grow. Some may be dealing with unscrupulous clinics or street dealers on the black market. Unfortunately, a number of vendors sell anabolic steroids online without a prescription. Individuals should also be aware that some dietary supplements advertised for body building may unlawfully include steroids or steroid-like substances, and the ingredient statement on the label may not include that information.

Q: What is the FDA doing to prevent those illegal sales?

A: FDA is taking a number of steps to discourage these practices. Action has been taken against online distributors who sell steroids without valid prescriptions, but an ongoing problem is that you can take one site down and another pops up.

The challenge is intensified by the fact that many online providers don’t accurately advertise the contents of the products they sell, they may be operating outside the U.S., and the drugs aren’t prescribed by a licensed practitioner who can help individuals weigh the risks and benefits. In such cases, individuals may have no idea what they are taking, what the appropriate dose should be, or what levels of control and safety went into the manufacturing process. These facts make the risks of taking anabolic steroids bought without a prescription even greater than they otherwise would be.

Q: What would you say to a teen you knew was tempted by steroids?


A: I would emphasize both the short and long-term potential for serious

harm to their health. Rather than making you look or perform better, steroids will more likely cause unfavorable results that could affect you for life.


I would also remind them that there are a number of ways to increase muscle mass and athletic performance, including a sensible regimen of exercise and diet, without resorting to extreme and dangerous therapies.

Q: What would you like to say to parents?

A: Parents tend not to believe their teens would consider taking anabolic steroids, but the truth is that the frequency of steroid use in this age group is far greater than many would guess.

During this time of year, when children are in school and getting back into their athletic routines, parents should watch for potential signs of abuse. Mood swings are among the first side effects to show up, and steroid use may lead to mania or depression. Acne is also an early side effect and can be followed by breast development in boys or increased body hair in girls. A surprising gain of muscle mass should also raise questions. It’s a problem that is as real as it is surprising. 

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